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**Turkish Foreign Policy towards Central Asia:
A New Era in Sight under the AK Parti?**

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey's initial foreign policy efforts towards the newly independent Central Asian republics are broadly considered to have been a failure. Turkey did not emerge as the leader it sought to be in the region, nor did Central Asian republics ultimately pursue the "Turkish model" of economic and political development as the Western world had hoped. While a host of reasons are given for such failure – ranging from Turkey's distraction by EU accession issues, to being perceived by Central Asian countries as an overbearing "big brother" with pan-Turkist aspirations – Turkey has entered a new foreign policy era under the leadership of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), under which the state of Turkish-Central Asian relations merits re-examination. Specifically, given the AKP's pursuit of a more active foreign policy agenda in its neighborhood since 2007, debate has emerged as to whether Turkey's current foreign policy approach toward Central Asian Turkic republics under the AKP has proven more successful than its earlier endeavors to be a leader within, and a model of development for, the region as a whole.

My paper argues that, while Turkey has indeed pursued a more practically-oriented approach towards Central Asia – in that it has increased its focus on issues such as economic and energy relations and has toned down slightly its rhetoric of Turkic 'brotherhood' – this has not translated into an era of categorically closer relations under the AKP's rule, where Turkey emerges as the dominant economic, political, and cultural beacon in the region. Though there are a host of reasons for this, a less-explored one is the fact that Turkey's interest in Central Asia has always been trumped by its agenda for Western integration. While this agenda led to Turkey's pursuit of an active foreign policy in Central Asia in the early to mid-1990s – until U.S. interest in Central Asia declined and Turkey became mired in domestic economic and political problems throughout the rest of the decade – the opposite was the case with Turkey's increasing focus on European integration. This paper seeks to explain how and why the allocation of resources and effort towards courting the European Union under AKP rule from 2002-2007 actually *inhibited* Turkey from focusing its attention on maintaining and strengthening relations with Central Asia during that time period.